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# Free Clinic Service: An Opportunity for Pharmacists Too

Kelly J. Wright, PharmD



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"Kofi" was living as a refugee in Columbus when he became a patient at a free clinic. He had been a successful computer expert and businessman in Africa, until he became so successful that his country's government took control of his company against his will. When he fought back, his life was threatened and he was forced to leave his family and his home. Kofi suffered from a chronic condition requiring prescription medications. Through the help of the volunteers, including pharmacists, at the Helping Hands Health and Wellness Center, located on Morse Road in Columbus, Ohio, he was given treatment and assistance to get his medications and control his condition. Now he has two jobs, and has been able to bring most of his family to Columbus to be free from an oppressive government.

## What is the role of a pharmacist volunteer in a free clinic?

Free clinics, otherwise known as charitable clinics, fill the gaps in the health care system for thousands of patients in Ohio every year. Sometimes that gap is urgent care, sometimes bridge care, and sometimes it is primary care. Joyce Bourgault, the Executive Director of Helping Hands, says that many of the patients they serve are working and unable to afford insurance. This can eventually lead to unemployment due to an inability to work because of uncontrolled medical conditions. Clinics often dispense short supplies of medications to patients and direct them to local pharmacies and federally funded health centers where they can receive continued care. They also assist patients with the application process for medication assistance programs. Clinics usually dispense medications under the supervision of a physician, so nurses or non-medical volunteers can dispense medications. Physicians and nurses are the staple medical volunteers in these clinics, but the time has come for

pharmacists to also step up and take their role in this area of patient care.

Every clinic is different, as is the role of its pharmacist. Some clinics do not dispense medication, which allows the pharmacist to take on other roles, such as obtaining medication histories, engaging in medication reconciliation, providing drug information and therapeutic recommendations, and counseling patients. When pharmacists dispense from free clinics they do so as an "agent of the prescriber," meaning that the prescriber supervises the dispensing process, signs off on the documentation, and takes official responsibility for the medications dispensed. In other words, free clinics operate as physician practices, subject to Ohio rules and regulations governing such practice sites. Even though a license to practice pharmacy is not legally required to dispense in this setting, a pharmacist is able to counsel patients and catch prescribing errors in addition to assisting with the dispensing process. Bourgault is extremely thankful for her team of "invaluable" pharmacists and student pharmacists who ensure that each patient has long-term access to medications that they can afford, and realizes that increased communication between the prescriber and the pharmacist is "to the benefit of the patients."

## What's going on in Columbus?

Pharmacists serving patients like Kofi across Columbus have been gathering together to form the **Central Ohio Free Clinic Pharmacist Volunteers Learning Community**. There are currently 21 pharmacists in this grass-roots effort, but the foundation for this community began in 2005 when Christine Murphy joined the Board of Physicians Free Clinic (PFC), now known as Physicians Care Connection (PCC). She became a volunteer pharmacist for PFC in 2006 and invited other pharmacists to join her. Student pharmacists from The Ohio

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State University College of Pharmacy began volunteering in 2008 and student coordinators continue to manage the student pharmacist scheduling process for PCC.

In the spring of 2009, Jerry Cable of OSU College of Pharmacy was one of several faculty coordinators in a course focused on inter-professional collaboration hosted at New Life Methodist Church (NLMC). NLMC was also conducting a health care clinic on Sunday mornings and asked the students and faculty in the course to present ideas for improving the clinic's services. Cable and his four students (Anna Gehres, Brigid Long, Matt Byrdy and Anuj Thirwani) volunteered to assist the clinic with formulary management and scheduling student volunteers to work during the Sunday morning clinic. This service is still growing, and the clinic now uses an efficient inventory management and dispensing process developed by these students.

Later that year, Cable and Byrdy visited another local free clinic, the Faith Mission Health Clinic, which serves the homeless population. They began dispensing medication and counseling patients at the clinic every Thursday evening. As more student pharmacists and pharmacists have joined the team at Faith Mission, their roles have become an integral part of the clinic's system. First, they interview the patient and compile a complete medication list for the physician. Student pharmacists then work with the physician throughout the patient's visit to engage in discussion about the patient's diagnosis and treatment. Finally, they dispense medications and counsel the patient.

Building once again upon growing experience and success, Cable, new pharmacist volunteers and a core group of student pharmacists reached out to the Helping Hands Health and Wellness Center, where they would eventually treat Kofi. By January 2011, the clinic had a regular schedule of pharmacists and students for the three nights per month they are open, and in January 2012, student pharmacists began performing medication histories/medication reconciliation before the patient sees the provider in addition to the established dispensing and counseling services.

This Central Ohio story is an example of the impact that a few volunteers can have. The movement is still growing, as one of the pharmacists who served at several of the clinics, Dr. Thad Franz, was asked to help develop a new free clinic called Grace in the City, Hardin Clinic. As a result, pharmacists have been a fundamental aspect of the clinic since it opened in the spring of 2011. What started with OSU professors and students has now grown into a learning community of pharmacists serving all over the city of Columbus, making an impact on countless patients. The purpose of the learning community is to enable each pharmacist and clinic to provide consistent and effective patient care. The clinics use similar forms and procedures for documentation of medication inventory and dispensing, which standardizes the process for volunteers who work at multiple sites. Most of the communication within the group occurs via e-mail and at the clinics, but there are also quarterly meetings where pharmacist volunteers can get to know each other and share successes and struggles from their various clinics. Each of the clinics mentioned above presents with its own set of challenges, so the group works as a team to solve problems and encourage each other. By working together, they present a strong, united presence and encourage the clinics to collaborate as well. This module may serve well for other cities and groups of volunteer health care providers.

### Why should I volunteer?

Everyone has a different reason for volunteering. Some see it as their professional duty to take care of the underserved. Some volunteer because of the positive impact that serving the less fortunate has on the entire community. Others serve as an act of worship or a natural expression of their faith. Dr. Frank Krivanek, a pharmacist at Memorial Hospital of Union County in Marysville, volunteers at Faith Mission because of the satisfaction he gets from helping others and working with students. "To see their faces after they counsel their first patient is fantastic," says Krivanek.

Student pharmacists are serving for the professional development and experience they receive. For example, graduates earning their Doctor of Pharmacy are eager to use their clinical skills in patient care. Yet, it is becoming increasingly competitive for them to obtain residencies or clinical positions. Volunteers in free clinics usually work closely with the rest of the health care team and are able to have a

## Free Clinics (continued from page 12)

level of involvement with patient care that can be difficult to achieve in some community or hospital settings. Several of Ohio's pharmacy schools are promoting service learning, so many students are working in these clinics and need experienced, passionate pharmacists there to be models of professionalism.

### How do I get involved?

There are free clinics all across Ohio looking for pharmacist and other medical volunteers. Are you ready to meet the need? A good place to start is the website of the Ohio Association of Free Clinics (O AFC) ([www.ohiofreeclinics.org](http://www.ohiofreeclinics.org)). Not all of Ohio's free clinics are members of O AFC, but the association consists of 41 free clinics in 51 counties and may be able to direct you to other clinics in your area. Another way to get involved is by contacting Jerry Cable at [cable@pharmacy.ohio-state.edu](mailto:cable@pharmacy.ohio-state.edu) if you are (1) a pharmacist or student pharmacist who would like to join the Central Ohio Free Clinic Pharmacist Volunteers Learning Community, or (2) anyone who would like to exchange and share information and stories about volunteering experiences and ideas.

Dr. Byrdy, one of the original students to work at NL MC, is now a clinical pharmacist at a hospital in Columbus. He reflects on what he has learned during his work in the free clinics. "I got to see a pretty good snapshot of a whole city by working at different places; from surrounding rural communities to downtown, I got to see a lot of different walks of life. In pharmacy school you learn based on ideal situations and ideal patients, but people present lots of individual challenges. As a pharmacist our role is to have an open line of communication... we are in a great role to make a difference." The time has come for pharmacists to join the physicians, nurses, and other health care providers in professional service. Inter-disciplinary partnerships for a common cause will continue to strengthen the health care system as a whole.

## SAVE THE DATE: FIRST ANNUAL COHCA MEETING

Council for Health Care Advocacy presents its First Annual Meeting



When: Saturday, September 14, 2013

Where: The Ohio State University College of Nursing

Please mark your calendars and join COHCA for a day filled with legislative updates and successes, CE opportunities, and breakout sessions offering members the opportunity to become more involved in the COHCA organization. We appreciate our members and want to harness your energy and enthusiasm while we move COHCA's agenda further.